DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 158 CG 011 199

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TITLE Changes in Self-Image of Divorced Women Taking Single Again Course. Preliminary Draft.
PUB DATE 4 Sep 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (84th, Washington, D.C., September 3-7, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; College Credits; *Divorce; Family Attitudes; *Females; *Humanistic Education; Identification (Psychological); *Marriage Counseling; Program Descriptions; *Self Concept; Self Esteem; *Social Attitudes

ABSTRACT

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT

Changes In Self-Image of Divorced Women Taking Single Again Course

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Abstract

In the past five years I have taught approximately 1000 students in experientially-oriented courses on the divorced and the widowed; of these 1000, about 300 have been divorced women. Many of these divorcees (but not all, by any means) have shown considerable change in self image from the start to the end of the course. I've illustrated these differences with what I call alpha and beta syndromes (or, simply, the cases of Anna and Betty).

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*Paper to be presented at American Psychological Association meeting, Washington D.C., on September 4, 1976.

The safest single generalization that I can make is that no generalizations apply to all of the approximately three hundred divorced women who have taken my course---taught in the Evening College at the University of Cincinnati, and elsewhere---at one time or another over the past five years.

There have been some remarkable changes among many of these women---from depression, defeat, and discouragement to inspiration, optimism, and openness---concerning their values about life and what it has to offer them. Among these women there are some generalizations that I can make.

Orientation

Let me first set the stage. In 1971, one of my books had been published - entitled Single Again. In Cincinnati, quite a number of people had read the book, and the Evening College at the University of Cincinnati asked me to teach a brief, no-credit course called Single Again---Disaster or Opportunity. That sort of course I now have taught five times---three times at the University and twice at a Catholic College, Edgecliff, in Cincinnati.

I have also taught, for undergraduate credit in Psychology, an Evening College course in the Psychology of the Widowed and the Divorced. I agreed to teach this course only if it might be experientially oriented rather than formulated in the traditional textbook style. Last week I completed the sixth such course.

I greatly prefer the non-credit course because of the greater freedom allowed. And, even more, because 90% to 95% of the participants are either widowed, divorced, or in troubled marriages. In the course offered for credit, this percentage drops to about 30% to 60%, since the course looks like an easy 3 hours of credit for our regular day or evening students.

The widowed represent a very small percentage of students---and widowers an almost negligible number. The largest single block of students are female and divorced. My most remarkable student was male and divorced.

Each evening is structured, more or less, around a single topic. These topics vary slightly from time to time as students voice their interests and curiosities which can often be structured into the course. Among the more common topics covered are: children in the one-parent home and in re-marriage; sex; religion; getting started again; advantages of being single; law; and alternatives to the traditional marriage.

- The Course Itself -

The first evening is spent largely on orientation; more than anything else, I'm trying to get a <u>feel</u> of what the class is like, for I'm a firm believer that every class has a distinct personality---a collective personality, as it were---of its own. I introduce myself and mention that years ago I went through a divorce that hurt me a great deal.

I encourage each student to identify herself/himself and try to get each one to mention her/his current marital status; however, if I sense that a person is reluctant to mention that status, I go on to the next student and try to embarrass no one. I must be doing something right, for I have not encountered even one obviously reluctant individual in the past three courses.

This orientation evening is spent in watching for anyone who may be so disturbed as to be disruptive of the class---or even so disturbed that the need is more for therapy than for a course. I try always to have a former student or another helping person present. This person---usually a woman--- can be helpful in many ways---for example by listening sympathetically (outside the classroom) to a sobbing student.

Aside from regular UC students, some have been referred by local psychiatrists or psychologists, some by attorneys, many by former students, and some by word of mouth at meetings of a group such as Parents Without Partners. Typically we have between sixty-five and 125 students.

The final half of the first evening usually is spent on a consideration of topics that might be of interest for future class sessions--- and a discussion on some one issue designed to get people involved. For example, in the course just concluded, we discussed "What are the differences, personality-and behavior-wise, between men and women?" Whatever the issue, it is calculated more to encourage participation than to resolve the issue.

Each of the remaining evenings of the course is devoted to one of the topics that has been mentioned in the class discussion or selected from a list of topics used in the past.

On a typical evening, I will start off with a presentation of my own. This may be a prepared lecture or an informal chat. After a question/discussion period, we take a short recess---with class members encouraged to mingle informally. After that, we may have several volunteered prepared presentations by class members. We try to keep each of these to about five minutes in length, so that there is maximum opportunity for discussion. And some students who may be reluctant to enter into my instructor-led discussion, may enter vigorously into these student-led discussions.

The remainder of the evening is "played by ear." If the discussion is vigorous, we continue it. If it bogs down or seems to be unsatisfactory, we have a second recess---then return for further discussion---perhaps centering on a slightly different, but related, topic.

The final evening is spent informally with coffee and soft drinks. All are encouraged to critique the course---and comments in writing are solicited.

Grading is done on a contract basis---and each student may verify his/her grade no later than this final evening.

Results

I mentioned earlier that my most successful single student has been a male divorced person. We'll call him Charles--his real name--for I have full release rights. He epitomizes what I have approached with many divorcees.

Charles' first contact was by telephone---he called from the mental ward of a local hospital. My book, he said, had helped him more than his therapists had. But, he wanted to know, "Can you make my wife love me again?"

"Probably not," was my reply. Paradoxically, perhaps, in nearly all such situations, the spouse who has been hurt will find that the only hope of getting the other person back---and even this is a slight hope---is by becoming sufficiently strong within himself that there is no longer need for that other person.

About three weeks later, he introduced himself to me at the beginning of a new course. That same evening, he repeated his question in front of the class. And yet, just a few weeks later in a discussion period---when another man asked about his wife, Charles was able to reply: "What woman are you talking about?"

I am not suggesting for one moment that all of Charles problems had been resolved---but he had certainly made progress! I had great assistance from class members in the case of Charles; for example, many members went out partying after class, and they took Charles with them.

He returned to work---and has advanced in his profession. He has developed several outside business interests and has been modestly successful. He assisted me in one subsequent course---and has made occasional visits to other classes. Charles has not remarried, but does do a great deal of dating.

I cannot cite any one divorced woman who has shown such obvious movement; however, the case of Anne (my alpha syndrome) is typical of many others at the beginning of a course.

The Case of Anne (the alpha syndrome)

Anne views herself as something less than a woman. It it were otherwise, her husband would not have left. She has had traces of anger at that husband---ex-husband, that is---but they have been only momentary and have passed quickly.

More often she feels sorry for herself---why did this have to happen to her? She had always considered herself a good wife---a good mother and a good woman, too, come to that. She hadn't given Don any cause for complaint. Or

had she? There must have been something wrong. She must have done something wrong---or he'd still be here, wouldn't he? It's all so confusing!

Anne sees herself as a matyred woman. It's all so unfair! She worked hard for Don---and the children---and the family as a whole. She has scrimped and saved---and did all sorts of things so that Don could further himself in his work. That's what makes this all so unfair---now that Don is making more money and they could begin to enjoy life---with vacations and clubs and a bigger-still home in a better-still neighborhood. Just when all of this was becoming possible, Don has to leave her for a younger woman!

Along with her feelings of hurt and confusion, Anne realizes that she is most vulnerable---more vulnerable now than when she was a teenager. Her divorce went through months ago---but she has dated only twice---and what experiences she had!

She thinks that men are no good. They're all out after one thing---and one thing only. She distrusts all men. At the same time, she knows that at least some of this must be in her own head---how will she ever learn to trust again? The man that she loved more than any other in her whole life, left her. Her few male contacts has been so unsettling. She feels that she is being taken advantage of---that she is horribly vulnerable.

How. . .oh, how can she ever learn to trust a man again? She thinks occasionally of suicide as the answer, but dismisses such thoughts quickly.

She recognizes that some of her feelings must be unreasonable, but she hasn't been able to sort them all out.

It is this sort of confusion that marks many of the women who have taken my course. I hasten to repeat---not all of them by any means---but many of them. Some of the women have their heads on straight---some of them are leading adequate and satisfying social lives---some are finding full satisfaction with their newly single-again status. But many have most of the symptoms of the alpha or Anne syndrome.

The Case of Betty (the beta syndrome)

Now what is the picture two or three months later---when the course is finished? Again, let's state it in terms of a typical divorced woman. We'll call her Betty; this is the beta syndrome.

Betty has made several friends---female---within the class. She has gone out several evenings with one of these friends. She has had two more dates---with the same man. And though she still is cautious, she likes him. He is definitely male, but he hasn't tried to make her prove immediately that she is female.

Betty looks more cheerful---and is---but she has moments when she still is most confused about the whole situation. She has not fully "cut the cord" from her ex-husband, but she can sometimes go days at a time without thinking of him.

She hasn't had any of those fleeting thoughts of suicide for more than a month now. When she feels discouraged and depressed---and there still are such times---she realizes that all is not hopeless---that other people have suffered in just the way that she has---and that things will get even better for her. And she knows that if things get too rough for her, there are several new friends on whom she can call. Betty now recognizes that--regardless of how unfair the situation may be--it does exist and it is one with which she must cope.

Perhaps the most wholesome single aspect of her new image is that she is now helping Charlotte---a recent divorcee who seems most depressed. Betty is finding less time to be distressed with her own situation and, in addition to her helping role, is finding more creative activities with which to occupy herself.

Discussion

There is no doubt that substantial changes do occur in many of the women; however, we have no quantitative data to substantiate the changes. And we can only speculate as to the reasons behind the changes.

First of all, as all of us who work with divorced women know, simply the passage of time can be instrumental in modifying the feelings, the self-images, the behaviors, even---of many divorced women. As time passes, some of the hurts and the angers and the despairs lessen and make way for more positive feelings, etc. to emerge.

But I believe that we are seeing much more than just the changes that time permits. The class provides a relatively non-threatening situation in which the woman is able to express some of her thoughts and feelings---and in which she can listen to other women and to men discuss theirs. The recess periods in mid-class are made longer than for regular courses, and this permits individuals to discuss matters briefly with me, with my assistant, or with other students.

Very often two or more women will discover that they have something in common, and this discovery provides the basis for the start of a friendship. And with the friendship, there tends to be more of an emphasis along positive lines.

And I believe that the co-educational aspect of the class is helpful. Women who may have come to believe that "all men are awful" have a chance to see that men, too, may be hurt through divorce and that men also have problems in trying to readjust during the post-divorce period. Some dating has resulted from class contacts, but I have no idea how much.

Summary

I have tried in this paper to tell you a little about the courses that I have taught for divorced or widowed persons. And I've tried to illustrate through the cases of Anne and Betty (call them Alpha and Beta if you prefer), changes in self-image that have occured in many of the divorced women when they have taken my course.